

# The Australian Chiropractor

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Chiropractic News & Views Report



## CHIRO OF THE YEAR

**Dr Joan van Rotterdam is awarded the 2020  
John A Sweaney AM Chiropractor of the Year Award**



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AUSTRALIAN  
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# Dr Joan van Rotterdam

## Chiropractor of the Year



## ALANNA MELVIN

**T**he John A Sweaney AM Chiropractor of the Year Award 2020 has been awarded to Dr Joan van Rotterdam for her continuous service and unwavering devotion to the health of rural, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and other disadvantaged communities.

Joan has devoted much of her chiropractic career to improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and disadvantaged communities through organisations such as Hands-on-Health Australia and as Chairperson of the ACA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rural and Remote Practitioner Network (ARRPN).

These groups and organisations established a number of programs and initiatives that have helped bridge the gap that the mainstream healthcare system does not always reach. This includes the inaugural Reconciliation Action Plan, which was led by Joan and launched in 2019 as the Associations commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

Growing up in a country town, Joan was not surrounded by allied health practitioners, so her love of chiropractic did not exactly come naturally. It wasn't until a severe back injury when she was 21 years-old that her family took her to see the new chiropractor in town, restoring Joan to her normal self fairly quickly. This sparked her interest in natural therapies, commencing a Bachelor of Science at the University of New England in Armidale, NSW.

Continuing with her love of science and anatomy, Joan enrolled at the Sydney College of Chiropractic, as it was the only course at the time that offered her the health science aspect she craved.

*"It wasn't until we started in the student clinics and seeing patients that I thought 'this is where I want to be'. I really enjoy that patient-chiropractor relationship and the contact I get with*

people every day,” Joan said.

Graduating in 1986 she moved to Toronto, Newcastle with her husband at the time, and began working for Dr Toni Hamilton. After giving birth to her first child, Joan then moved into her own practice, starting out in her home then eventually moving to her own clinic. After some years in practice, she began working for her husband’s medical clinic as the practice manager, while still seeing her own patients to keep in touch with the profession and the practice.

Working as the practice manager gave her a unique perspective as a chiropractor, as she was able to see ‘both sides of the fence’. It also gave her an understanding of a medical practitioner’s viewpoint, finding that balance in everything she does within the field.

After 15 years as practice manager, Joan unfortunately had to start over after her marriage broke down and she lost her job. Having chiropractic to fall back on, she built a little clinic in her home and began practicing on a semi-retired basis.

*“I’m in a different phase of my life right now, and I’m really enjoying being in practice and catching up with patients that I’ve known for years.”*

Growing up in a country town, Joan is aware of the problems associated with access to healthcare faced by rural communities. Inspired by her desire to provide access to care for all, she began practicing at Awabakal Aboriginal Medical Service in Newcastle early in her career. Working there for two years sparked her interest in Aboriginal health. She also has a personal connection to the issue of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, having family members of Aboriginal descent. Understanding her early passion in this area, Dr Dein Vindigni OAM asked Joan if she would like to become part of a project with Hands-on-Health Australia (HoHA) in Kempsey, NSW called ‘Bringing Chiropractic to Durri’. Established in 1987, HoHA is a charity which enables volunteers to provide healthcare and other services to communities, societies and people who are marginalised.

Working as a volunteer for HoHA, she was asked if she would be

interested in organising a team of students to provide care to players at the Indigenous NRL Knockout, or better known as the Koori Knockout, which takes place every October long weekend. That was nine years ago and Joan has been running it ever since.

*“The first Knockout was held in Raymond Terrace, so I asked Macquarie University and RMIT University students if they would like to help provide care and that’s how the chiropractic input into the Koori Knockout started, and it’s been going ever since.”*

*“I love the Knockout. I get paid in hugs and I just have a ball and enjoy the student interaction as well. We have also been invited to help set up a similar program supervising chiropractic students at NAIDOC week, which is a real privilege.”*

As well as currently sitting as Chairperson of the HoHA Board, taking over from the late John A Sweaney AM, Joan is also the ACA member representative of the National

Rural Health Alliance, who inspired the ARRPN Committee to take on their biggest project to date, the Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP).

The purpose of the RAP is to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by showing an organisational commitment to cultural acceptance and understanding. The RAP itself is a strategic document, which includes practical actions that will drive the Association’s contribution to reconciliation both internally and in the chiropractic community.

*“The importance of the RAP is that it shows we as a profession are committed to Aboriginal health and to closing the gap. The ARRPN Committee learnt so much during the RAP process and it really changed how we see and approach Aboriginal health. Our Committee gained a lot from doing the RAP and as a profession I think we can be proud of what we have achieved.”*

Joan hopes initiatives like the



RAP and HoHA will connect more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with this aspect of healthcare, and inspire practitioners interested in working in this space to help narrow the divide.

*“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may not have initial experience with chiropractors, but there is a real spiritual connection associated with healing, so hands-on therapy is important to them. I’d like to see more chiropractors working in this area, and it will come, we just have to be patient. But it has to come from within our own communities as well.”*

With all that she has accomplished and causes she has given herself to, it is easy to see why Joan is the perfect candidate for this prestigious award. However, the ‘perfect candidate’ isn’t exactly how she would describe herself.

*“To be honest I think there are a lot of people who deserve it more than me. I’m really honoured that people think*

*I should be given this award and I’m really touched, but I don’t do things expecting to receive an award. I do these things because I think they’re necessary.”*

Humbled by the Chiropractor of the Year Award, she shares it with the HoHA organisation and the ARRPN Committee, as much of the work would not have been accomplished without their tireless efforts and dedication she says.

*“Everybody in these groups work so hard. There is still a lot that needs to be done in this field, but I think as a community those groups can definitely achieve a lot.”*

Despite all she has achieved, including most recently a PhD in Clinical Epidemiology, Joan is still committed to the immense work that needs to continue. Working closely with HoHA CEO Franca Smarrelli has propelled the organisation forward. Their most recent work includes a big social media campaign to secure funding for HoHA to ensure the



organisation can still function in this new era of health.

*“We’ve had to think about our clinics and how we run them. I’m hoping that we will go forward and get to the point where it is a sustainable organisation. Something we’re working on as well with ARRPN is having chiropractors included in a rural generalist post graduate program, but that’s going to take some time.”*

Between chairing an organisation, an ACA Committee and running her own clinic, the little time that Joan has she enjoys spending in her garden. She is also a lover of craft projects and has been adopted by several animals including wild ducks, lorikeets as well as taking care of her own dogs, chickens and fish. She also has three daughters whom she loves and adores, and hopes to see soon, with the three being located across the country in Adelaide, Melbourne and Canberra.

With her dedication to such an important cause, and a true champion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health as well as rural health, Joan is a beyond worthy recipient for the Chiropractor of the Year Award. Congratulations once again, and we look forward to seeing Joan’s incredible work change the face of healthcare for all Australians. ■



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